Desires Trespassing Identities in Nella Larsen's Passing

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In an influential essay entitled "The 'Nameless...Shameful Impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand and Passing*" that now serves as an introduction to many editions of Larsen's two novellas, Deborah McDowell made the important claim that the relatively "safe theme" of racial passing is used as a disguise for the more dangerous theme concerning African American women's homosexual desire. In McDowell's words, Passing "is an account of Clare's racial passing and distinguishes between surface and depth...*underneath the safety of the surface* is the more dangerous story–if not named explicitly–of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (90; my emphasis). In what follows, I do not intend to dispute this challenging argument which gave new insight into Larsen's narrative but, rather, to avoid a methodological fallacy inherent in such an approach to the themes of racial identity and passing. McDowell, in fact, distinguishes between surface and depth; appearance and "truth". Moreover, she considers the text's surface as deceiving and seeks for the "true identity" of the text behind its surface. Such literary criticism can therefore be compared to the psychoanalytic practice, which seeks for the true, "latent content" of the dream behind its misleading "manifest content." What matters, according to both theoretical frames, is not the visible but the invisible; not surface but depth. Now, if we apply this logic to the theme of passing, the risk is to reiterate the very distinction that the narrative challenges or, at least, renders problematic: the positing of a true, essential identity behind a deceiving surface.

It is with this methodological warning in mind that I decided to explore Larsen's treatment of passing–which concerns not only "race" but also sexuality and class–through the prism of Deleuze and Guattari's (D&G) anti-psychoanalytic theory of desire.[1] Through D&G I intend to focus on that intermediate space, which is also an epistemological gap that the practice of passing opens up. More specifically, my aim is to interrogate, via the French theorist's radical understanding of desire, expositions of subjectivity and its construction which are founded on the ontological distinction between racial "sameness" and "otherness." As distinguished from these metaphysical discourses of which psychoanalysis is one, D&G's theory of desire neither attempts to fix identities within the invisible depths of the subject's personal unconscious, nor in stable, dualistic, ontological "essences" but, on the contrary, opens up new possibilities to question and challenge the stability of a unitary and coherent self. In fact, D&G would agree with Elaine Ginsberg's as she writes that

1 I will draw mainly on their early work, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, though not only.

"identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent"(4).

Furthermore, it should be noted that like questions of racial identity–along with sexuality and class, the key element of Larsen's *Passing*–D&G's vision of desire can not be relegated to a personal and private dimension which only concerns the individual subject. Instead, desire for them should be understood as a relational force between individuals that takes place in a wider socio-political field. Thus, they write that "fluxes are the only objectivity of desire...[and they] are produced in a social field" (*Anti-Oedipus* 78); and they add: "There is only desire and the social, and nothing else" (ib., 29).[2] As such, desire is not inside the subject, but outside, or better, *in-between* subjects who create connections, "assemble" (*agencent*), and initiate fluxes of becoming. Hence, Deleuze states that "desire assembles (something) in relationship with an outside, with a becoming" (*Politique*, no page references in this edition; my translation). Desire for D&G, is very much like passing–a verb in the continuous form, which denotes a continuous process rather than a fixed state. It is a processes of becoming; a flux, that is "always in-between" since, as they put it, desire "grows from the middle" of encounters (*Dialogues* 93).[3] Briefly put, for D&G, desire, like identity, is the outcome of a negotiation that takes place when those lines of flight (lignes de fuite), which for them represent subjects, find a place of intersection.

And indeed, Larsen's Passing, as its chapters tell us, deals with an "encounter" (and a subsequent "re-encounter") that triggers explosive forms of destabilizing desires. The first encounter takes place between Irene Redfield, a light skinned African American woman from whose perspective the story is narrated, and a childhood friend, Clare Kendry, who, being also light skinned, passes for white. Let us briefly notice that Clare's act of passing is already evoked by her name that is not only French but also signifies, at least on a phonetic level, "light." Both signifier and signified point to two of the frontiers that are crossed by this character: class (French culture and language suggests aristocratic sophistication) and "race" (which I understand as a biological fiction which determines the subject's social reality). More to the point, it is important to stress that Irene, who functions as a point of view character, immediately frames her relationship with Clare within a binary logic that divides "sameness" from "otherness." Indeed, Irene constantly juxtaposes her own "sacrificial" self which she depicts in terms of loyalty to her family and "race" to Clare's "having way" (153) and "selfishness" (182)–characteristics which, according to Irene, motivate Clare's act of passing. If, on the one hand, Clare represents individual agency which, in turn, leads her to "act" or perform an identity–Irene

2 According to Elspeth Probyn, D&G's conception of "desire can be used to scramble traditional thresholds between the social and the subjective" (49).
3 Deleuze adds: "People are always in the middle of some business, where nothing may be designated at its origin. Always things encountering each other" (*Dialogues* 111).

suspects that "Clare was acting" (182)–Irene, on the other hand, adheres to collectivizing categories of "race."[4] More precisely, Irene's sense of identity (from Latin *identitas*, the same) is defined in opposition to Clare through the establishment of a barrier that divides the subject who passes and the one who supposedly does not. We read: "they were strangers in their desires and ambitions...Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad and just as firm as if in Clare did not run the strain of black blood" (192). The deconstruction of this artificial binary is one of the implicit structural intentions of Larsen's narrative.

Larsen's *Passing* is, among other things, about that "strain" of desires that (tres)passes this "barrier" showing its fragility, relativity and artificiality. Hence, desire becomes a privileged place for the analysis of more polymorphous and pervasive forms of passing. What mainly concerns me in the dichotomy Irene-Clare is not its two individual poles, but rather the hyphen that connects and opposes them–what D&G would call the "assemblage" (*agencement*) Clare-Irene–and the movement that ensues. Desire, thus understood, is the hyphen in-between subjects that sets in motions polymorphous fluxes of becoming, which, in turn, threaten the stability of the ontological categories of "sameness" and "otherness;" "identity" and "difference;" "blackness" and "whiteness," as well as the distinction between "individualism" (according to Irene, the cause of passing) and "racial loyalty." It is thus ironic that if Irene stands for a collective vision of identity, and Clare stands for individualism, the initials of the characters' names (I/C) already inverse the order of the dichotomy individual-collective. Further, what motivates Clare's "homecoming" is an example of adherence to collectivizing racial norms, whereas Irene's own passing "for the sake of convenience" (227) is motivated by purely individualistic reasons. Finally, Clare and Irene's "difference" is already initially questioned by the plot–at the Drayton, they are both introduced as two light skinned women who pass for white in order to access class mobility. Bluntly put, the texture of Larsen's *Passing* casts reified binary oppositions into crisis.

And yet, Irene defines herself and Clare as fundamentally "strangers in their desires;" and, if we conceive of desire in isolation, before their meeting, this is certainly true. Irene's desire, in the initial pages of the novel, can be conceptualized in terms of a psychoanalytical "pleasure principle" whose goal is to fill a lack as well as to preserve a coherent self-image (Freud's ego). In fact, at the top of the Drayton hotel, Irene finds the object of her desire: "The tea, when it came, was all that she had desired and expected. In fact, so much was it what she had desired and expected that after the first cooling drink she was able to forget it" (147). As Samira Kawash points out, her desire "is limited to that which can be satisfied" (158). It is a docile

[4] The binary opposition individual/collective is at the core of Gayle Wald's theoretical framework concerning racial passing (see Crossing the Line 48).

desire that only produces a docile passive subject. Irene's desire does not push the subject to act but only to re-act.

It is therefore relevant that Irene's potentially transgressive action of entering the Drayton (a hotel for white only) is described in the passive tense: she was "being wafted upward on a magic carpet to a modern world" (147). Moreover, the attainment of pleasure casts desire into oblivion. For Deleuze, in fact, pleasure only causes "an interruption in the process of desire" and "is the only means for a person to 'find himself' again" (Deleuze, 1993, 139). Pleasure, for Irene, has the function of a Lacanian mirror that reflects a unitary coherent self-same identity with which imaginary identification is possible ("Le stade du miroir" 95). In D&G's less optimistic view, pleasure confines Irene's desire, very much like her self, within a territory defined by the boundaries of an established social order. Now, if the subject is not confronted with a mirror which reflects unity and sameness, but with another, living self who represents (in the German sense of *Vorstellung*, what stands before the self) both racial sameness and difference, what ensues is risk of a crisis in the subject's self-representation. This crisis is triggered by the encounter with Clare more revolutionary and active desire which threatens the very stability of the boundaries Irene struggles to preserve.

On the top of the Drayton, Irene is exposed to "the seduction of Clare Kendry's smile" (162) as well as her "very seductive" (165) voice. After McDowell's insightful analysis it has become common to conceive of this process of seduction as exclusively sexual. However, following D&G, desire should not be conceived solely in sexual terms, but in its multiple polymorphous ramifications. This direction can be pursued by following the etymology of the word "seduction" (from Latin *seducere*, to lead apart, from *se-* apart + *ducere* lead). Clare leads Irene apart from what the latter considers as "the right direction" (188) and "proper setting" (193) which guarantees what for Irene is "the most important and desired thing in life": "security" (235) This desire for security, very much like my discussion of pleasure, represents a desire for a self-sameness which is mirrored by the fundamental categories that sustain her identity. Irene says: "I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house" (210). Her sense of being is totally identified (hence the italics) with "stable" identity categories. She defines her self in terms of *gender* and *sexual* stability (she is both mother and wife), which also links her to *racial* coherence (her blackness is guaranteed by her darker husband and child and she reinforces it by being active member in the Negro Commuinity) and class security identified with the American symbol of middle class national belonging: the house. Her identity is "wrapped up" within this sedentary, domestic territory, and thus is given organic unity, stability and coherence.

Clare's "wild desire" (145), on the contrary, threatens Irene's "sedentary" predisposition by introducing a nomadic element: what D&G call "a movement of deterritorialization" (*Dialogues* 99) which is linked to a process of becoming other. Clare functions indeed as Irigary "other mirror" that, unlike the Lacanian mirror, does not reflect sameness, but destabilizes this distinction: it becomes an indicator of a threatening "otherness" within the "same," while at the same time initiating fluxes of becoming in-between these two poles that destabilize their boundaries. This process of destabilization takes place on more than one level.[5] On the level of character psychology, it can be conceived in terms of fluxes of destabilizing homo-erotic sexual desire that threaten the stability of Irene's heterosexual identity, as McDowell aptly points out. This explains Irene's constant loss of control in front of Clare and her multiple attempts throughout the novel to regain stability in front of her mirror.

However, if we remain more on the surface of identity, and focus on the racial categories the characters represent, such a destabilizing effect is already introduced in the Drayton scene, when Irene, not knowing that the woman at the next table is Clare, fails to identify her, or as she says, she "can't seem to *place*" her (151; my emphasis). Irene says:

> Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro./ Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted they were able to tell...(150).

Irene's failure to read/place Clare is revealing on many levels. First, it undermines the credibility in her narrative authority. Second, it undermines the binary that she tries to posit between white and black people, since her failure paradoxically "places" *her* on the side of the former "stupidity". Hence, the reader is also immediately drawn into a process of questioning the stability of racial definitions. S/he becomes part of the con-text or assemblage and in the circulation of fluxes of reading.[6]

Third, and most important, this failure in reading can be justified not so much in terms of essential differences inherent in abstract categories of "whiteness" and "blackness", but rather in terms of the positionality of the subject. Thus, the assemblage created by Clare and Irene on the top of the Drayton determines the kind of fluxes of reading that ensue. Moreover, Irene's misinterpretation shows that the identification, stability and determinacy of a subject's identity is radically dependent

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5 I am here in disagreement with Nell Sullivan's use of Lacan as she considers that Irene "sees in Clare an image more fitting to represent 'the mental permanence of the I' " (378). Clare functions as the very opposite of an "image of Irene's self" (375). Moreover, following D&G, she introduces a difference of potential that causes originally blocked forms of desires to flow.

6 Reading, writing, eating, sleeping, shitting...everything for D&G has the potential to engage in fluxes of desire that are produced when "desiring machines" encounter and assemble. The image of the "machine", like the "body without organs", makes clear their non-humanistic approach to desire, and links it to the surface, that plane of immanence where connections can be made.

on her/his placement within a larger assemblage. In this sense, identity, whether racial, sexual or class identity, depends on the effect of mutual reflecting mirrors that are constantly moving and thus constantly dis-*place* the unity and coherence of the subject. It is in this sense that Clare's seduction destabilizes the equilibrium of the normative assemblages in which Irene can assert her self-sameness (i.e., family, marriage, the "Negro" community...). Identity becomes a matter of placement, and as such "grows from the middle" of interactions (*Dialogues* 93). This is obviously true for the mulatto or the passing figure but can also be extended to all process of identity formation. In fact I agree with Kate Bornstein when she writes that "everyone is passing; some have an easier job at it than others" (125).

Larsen's passing thrives with examples in which the subject's identity is determined by that in-between hyphen that connects subjects. In this light, Irene's refusal to be the "*link* between [Clare] and her poorer darker brethern" (185; my emphasis), can be understood in terms of self-protectiveness from the presence of a destabilizing element within her assemblages, but also as a deeper anxiety which stems from the realization that the subject can always be dis-placed. That is to say, it can be reduced to an in-between element (a link) within mobile social forces. This is also D&G's understanding of the subject. In fact Deleuze writes: "there are no more subjects but dynamic individuations without subjects which constitute collective assemblages" (*Dialogues* 93). Larsen depicts a similar phenomenon of de-individualization throughout her novella. However, the emphasis is not on its liberating effect but on its destabilizing consequences. Her characters' identities, in fact, are placed within a larger social and national narrative that legally constrains the potential plasticity of their bodies within legally restrictive borders.

And yet the instability of racial identity is used by Larsen to create assemblages that subvert racist and essentialist notions of identity. One of these instances concerns a tea party where Clare, Irene and Gertrude (a light skinned "African-American" woman who married a white man) have to endure Clare's husband's racist remarks. Ignorant of the identity of the women he is addressing John Bellew affirms: "I don't dislike [Negroes]. I hate them...They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (172). It is true, as Nell Sullivan has pointed out, that this passage can be seen as placing the three African-American women in a position where they are "powerless to challenge his version of the truth" (376).[7] However, following D&G's conception of desire as always wanting more connections, it becomes possible to include the figure of the reader in the assemblage Larsen creates. From this perspective, the relationships of power are subverted, since Larsen's deft narrative

7 Blackmer makes a similar point as she states that Clare's friends "knowledge leaves them powerless in the face of Bellew's privileged and voluble ignorance" (62).

move puts the reader in a privileged position of knowledge. In fact, if power and knowledge are related, it is John (a common name for common racist opinions) that is deprived of power. Engaging with D&G's conception of desire can thus not only be useful to challenge the stability of identities, but also to reveal the multiplicity inherent in textual identities, and reminding that even in the act of reading "truth" is always a matter of position and of the assemblage the reader creates.[8]

Finally I would like to return to Irene's identity and the pessimistic ending of the book: the death of Clare–a narrative choice in line with the literary topos of the "tragic mulatta"–is accompanied by the shattering of Irene's sense of a coherent selfhood. Both tragic events, as critics have pointed out, are foreshadowed by images of fragmentation and destruction.9 Most notably a "shattered cup" (221) dropped "incidentally" (like Clare) by Irene and Irene "tearing [Clare's] letter across"(191). The dissolution of the self assumes a negative undertone given the historical and national context in which the racial subject is placed. Individual volition has to submit to a normative collectivizing definition of racial identity or dissolve into darkness, as the novella's closure suggests. This closure, on the one hand, is very much in line with D&G's description of the modern man, the neurotic which they oppose to the revolutionary schizo. The "schizo continually wandering about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best as he can, he plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization...seeking the limit of capitalism" (Anti-Oedipus 35). Contrariwise, the neurotic's desire has been blocked by the process of reterritorialization inherent in psychoanalysis and capitalism itself, and has been confined within the limits of the family. Similarly Clare and partially Irene's revolutionary desire are thwarted by the racist ideology they live in (hence their destruction).

And yet, on the other hand, for the contemporary reader, and in the light of D&G's conception of desire, a different message can be drawn from the novel. This is best epitomized in another image of fragmentation which depicts Irene destruction of Clare's first letter:

> With an unusual methodicalness she tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares...The destruction completed, she gathered them up, rose, and moved to the train's end. Standing them she dropped them over the railing and watched them scatter...(178)

While it is possible to read this passage as another anticipation of Clare's dissolution, others readings can be *produced*. The image of a train projected forwards and the scattered fragments of letter spreading behind beautifully epitomize D&G's understanding of desire which they define as a "line of escape" (*une ligne de*

8 Indeed, there are provocative links to be explored between D&G's notion of assembling desire and Reception Theory's emphasis on the assemblage between reader and text, in which the former, as Iser puts it, "occupying shifting vantage points" (Act 35) *produces* meaning.
9 See Goldsmith.

fuite) which projects itself forwards, towards the unknown and which implies the dissolution of a unitary self. In this light, Irene's act of tearing the letter can be seen to echo her husband's desire to "tear himself and his possessions loose from their proper setting" (193). It implies a movement of deterritorialization which, like a train moving forwards, opens new possibilities for self-definition while leaving static and reified conceptions of unitary and coherent identities scattered behind.

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